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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**Trials of Command:**  
**General John D. Lavelle and the Seventh Air Force in Vietnam**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

Dale R. White, Lt Col, USAF

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Date: 7 April 2011

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Title:** Trials of Command: General John D. Lavelle and the Seventh Air Force in Vietnam

**Author:** Dale R. White, Lt Col, USAF

**Thesis:** General John D. Lavelle protected the lives of the airmen assigned to the Seventh Air Force through a liberal interpretation of the rules of engagement (ROE) encouraged by Pentagon and White House leadership in 1971. The following year, the Nixon White House and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird made Lavelle the scapegoat for unauthorized bombings of North Vietnam; nevertheless, it was Lavelle's own lapse in judgment that served as the catalyst for a culture of questionable integrity in his command, warranted his removal as commander of the Seventh Air Force, and forced his premature retirement in the permanent grade of Major General.

**Discussion:** In July 1971, Air Force General John D. Lavelle assumed command of the Seventh Air Force. After just seven months on the job, Lavelle found himself relieved of command, rushed into retirement, and the focus of congressional hearings regarding his actions as the Seventh Air Force commander. Initially citing health issues as the reason for his abrupt retirement, the Air Force later revealed publicly that it had lost faith in Lavelle because of irregularities in his command responsibilities while executing the air war. Subsequently, allegations of unauthorized bombing and falsified operational reports surfaced in the media. A media craze and congressional hearings ensued that put Lavelle on public trial and, ultimately, forced him to retire at his permanent grade of Major General. After 40 years of silence, and the death of Lavelle, the release of the Nixon Presidential Tapes shed new light on the actions of Lavelle and brought into question his dismissal and subsequent disciplinary action by the Air Force and Congress.

**Conclusion:** The release of the Nixon Presidential Tapes and other supporting documentation provide evidence that Lavelle had authorization to execute protective reaction strikes in bombing targets in Northern Vietnam. Lavelle pushed the envelope at every opportunity to protect his Airmen and to influence the outcome of the war; however, a miscommunication with his subordinates changed the climate of integrity in his command. In turn, those looking in from the outside built a story of a rogue commander who fought his own war and covered his actions through orders to falsify operational reports. The White House and the Pentagon needed a scapegoat to bridge the gap between the politicians and the American people. Managing a very unpopular war during an election year had everyone operating under a cloak of secrecy to prevent the American public from knowing the truth. When the story broke showing evidence of a very different war, the single letter from an Airman in Thailand set off a chain of events that captured a nation and ruined the career of a decorated officer. A chain of events that one could argue was the result of a miscommunication generated by the commander himself. From the White House to the Pentagon, self-preservation became the mode of operation and the nation's leadership invested everything into letting one man take the fall for the mistruths of the unpopular war.

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## **PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I pursued this topic purely through my interest in leadership and ethics in command; however, the more I researched the topic, the more determined I became to find the truth regarding Lavelle and his command tenure in Vietnam. Many critics labeled Lavelle unethical and motivated by power, yet others saw him as a scapegoat for leadership failures in Washington. In the end, I related to him as a leader and empathized with the dilemma he faced, as a commander sending his airmen into harm's way. Although his leadership mistakes were inexcusable, his integrity and moral courage remained unsurpassed. Lavelle's story will remind me forever that leadership and command is not easy, doing the "right thing" is not always clear, and the unintended consequences of our actions can have lasting effects well beyond our tenure as commanders.

I would like to thank Dr. Paul Gelpi for his constant mentoring and encouragement. He always listened to my thoughts and pushed me to dig deeper and to draw out the truth from my perspective as an Air Force officer. To my wife, Julie, and our girls, Kennedy and Delaney: your unconditional support and amazing patience during my long nights and weekends of research, and the even longer nights of writing, are deeply appreciated.

## Introduction

"My father was heartbroken and I saw him physically and mentally broken by the ordeal. He fought back with the help of my mother and recovered his strength, confidence, and pride before he died of a heart attack five years later. In the end, I think he found comfort in knowing that what he did saved some airmen's lives, and that was worth more to him than four stars."<sup>1</sup>

- John D. Lavelle, Jr., January 2007

In July 1971, Air Force General John D. Lavelle assumed command of the Seventh Air Force. After seven months on the job, Lavelle found himself relieved of command, rushed into retirement, and the focus of congressional hearings regarding his actions as the Seventh Air Force Commander. The Air Force asserted at first that Lavelle had retired for health reasons, but later revealed that it had lost faith in Lavelle due to "irregularities in the conduct of his command responsibilities."<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, stories of unauthorized bombings and falsified operational reports surfaced in the media. A media craze and congressional hearings ensued, placing Lavelle on public trial and unfairly convicting him in the media and the court of public opinion. The Department of Defense (DOD), the Air Force, or Congress made no genuine effort to investigate the allegations or defend his actions. The national scandal destroyed his career, his health, and nearly his family, and made him the first general officer in military history to retire in a lower grade due to disciplinary reasons.

General John D. Lavelle protected the lives of the airmen assigned to the Seventh Air Force through a liberal interpretation of the rules of engagement (ROE) encouraged by Pentagon and White House leadership in 1971. The following year, the Nixon White House and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird made Lavelle the scapegoat for unauthorized bombings of North Vietnam; nevertheless, it was Lavelle's own lapse in judgment that served as the catalyst



for a culture of questionable integrity in his command, warranted his removal as commander of the Seventh Air Force, and forced his premature retirement in the permanent grade of Major General. However, thirty-five years after the allegations and his forced retirement, newly released information in 2007 led the Air Force to reexamine Lavelle's actions. To do so, the Air Staff convened an Air Force Board for the Correction of Military Records. Family and friends of Lavelle asserted the new information, which included taped conversations between President Richard M. Nixon and National Security Advisor Dr. Henry A. Kissinger and others, exonerated Lavelle. In their view, the new information cleared Lavelle of all accusations and presented information that should lead to the posthumous reinstatement of his four-star rank.

The correction board convened in October 2009 and determined the actions taken against Lavelle were in error and an injustice. The board concluded the taped White House conversations between Nixon and Kissinger indicated the president approved strikes on surface-to-air (SAM) sites and consented to the characterization of those strikes as "protective reactions."<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the board found the evidence demonstrated that former Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, directed Lavelle to interpret the ROE liberally and that senior commanders in Southeast Asia and the Pentagon agreed with his order of liberal interpretation and protective reactions. The board concluded that the released tapes corroborated what Lavelle maintained all along: he had authorization to bomb the targets in question some forty years earlier. A final piece of evidence was a memo from the former Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) General Counsel (Appendix A) at the time of the congressional hearings. In the memo, the former counsel "flatly and persuasively opines that had the information

revealed in the White House tapes been available to the SASC, the confirmation outcome would have been different.”<sup>4</sup>

The Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records recommended to the Secretary of the Air Force and the Secretary of Defense that the president nominate Lavelle for retirement in the grade of General (O-10) with an effective date of 7 April 1972.<sup>5</sup> President Barack H. Obama accepted the board’s recommendation and nominated Lavelle for posthumous restoration to the grade of General (O-10) on 4 August 2010.<sup>6</sup> The media immediately reported the nomination by President Obama, fueled by the new information presented in Nixon White House tapes, as an apparent exoneration of Lavelle for his actions as the Seventh Air Force commander in Vietnam. Lavelle supporters viewed this as a suitable end to a grave injustice, but it only tells a small part of a complex story while leaving countless questions unanswered and relevant leadership lessons undocumented. Lavelle’s actions, arguably authorized, degraded the climate of integrity in the Seventh Air Force during his command tenure. Additionally, the actions and ethics of the leaders in the White House and the Pentagon are worthy of review, as they influenced the cause, course, and outcome of the case of General John D. Lavelle.

### **The Rise of an Air Force General**

“I told you about times when the boss had said, “Hey, I wouldn't have given you the job if I didn't think you could do it.” This was the Air Force attitude. The whole Air Force was one team.”<sup>7</sup>

-General John D. Lavelle, April 1978, Air Force Oral History Interview

Lavelle graduated from John Carroll University in Columbus, Ohio in 1938. The following year, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps as an aviation cadet and received his flying wings and

commission as a second lieutenant on 21 June 1940. In 1942, after serving as a flying instructor at Randolph Field, Lavelle received his first leadership position as squadron commander and director of flying while assigned as initial cadre at Waco Army Air Field, Texas.<sup>8</sup> He departed Waco in 1945 for Europe to fly tactical combat missions with the 412<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron.<sup>9</sup>

Lavelle returned from Europe in 1946 for assignment to Headquarters Air Materiel Command at Wright Field, Ohio. At Wright Field, Lavelle was selected as one of two officers charged with negotiating and writing the division of assets agreements and operating procedures for the buildup of the new Air Force established in 1947.<sup>10</sup> In 1949, Lavelle received an assignment to the U.S. Far East Air Force in Japan where he played an instrumental role in the establishment of a supply system in support of the Korean War. Upon his return from Japan, he continued on a leadership track serving as a wing, group, and base commander; as well as multiple Headquarters Air Force tours and a NATO tour serving as the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Headquarters Fourth Allied Tactical Air Force. In 1966, Lavelle assumed command of the Seventeenth Air Force at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, which consisted of the 26<sup>th</sup> Tactical Reconnaissance Wing, 36<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, 50<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, and the 38<sup>th</sup> Tactical Missile Wing. The Seventeenth was a NATO-committed major subcommand of USAFE with its operations spanning Germany, Italy, and Libya. Lavelle commanded the Seventeenth's versatile, combat-ready force fully equipped with supersonic jet fighters and tactical missiles with nuclear, conventional, and air-to-air capabilities.<sup>11</sup> His tenure as commander of the Seventeenth Air Force with its breadth of operational assets provided him

the foundation and experience for future operational assignments with greater rank and responsibility.

During his tours in the Pentagon, Lavelle made a name for himself as a Major General serving as the Chairman of the Air Staff board. The relationships he built, most notably with Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Secretary of the Air Force Harold Brown, paid dividends as he continued to achieve higher rank and responsibility within the Air Force. In 1967, Lavelle returned from Germany receiving a third star and an assignment to the Defense Communications Planning Group (DCPG) established by Secretary McNamara. Lavelle worked on classified sensor projects designed to stop or slow down the infiltration from North Vietnam to South Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> Lavelle reported directly to McNamara in DCPG and often directed the Air Force on specific budgetary and service acquisition actions. In this capacity, Lavelle often found himself at odds with the Air Force Chief of Staff, General John Ryan, on acquisition and sensor issues regarding the F-4s and drones in Vietnam. Many of the project and operational issues Lavelle championed in DCPG ended up with Ryan for a service decision.<sup>13</sup>

By the end of his DCPG tour, Lavelle had won recognition throughout the Pentagon for making DCPG effective while keeping its unique acquisition programs on time and routinely under budget. Lavelle's reward for his great success in DCPG would come in the form of a request from General Ryan for him to review the troubled Air Force C-5 program and a proposed solution to get the program back on track after a string of late deliveries, cost overruns, and contract disputes. The plan, which consisted of assigning 408 Air Force personnel to Lockheed to oversee and manage the program, essentially placed the Air Force in charge of the management and operations of the Lockheed C-5 manufacturing plant.<sup>14</sup>

After research and deliberation, Lavelle informed Ryan the proposed solution was a terrible plan and a "lose-lose" scenario for the Air Force. He believed it set a bad precedent with defense contractors, and further maintained the Air Force would receive the blame if the program continued on its path to failure. However, Ryan had already committed to the plan and chose Lavelle as the Air Force general to lead the effort. Lavelle voiced adamant disagreement with the Chief's decision; however, as an Air Force officer he would ultimately follow the Chief's orders.<sup>15</sup>

Shortly after the meeting with Ryan, Lavelle received a message from Ryan's staff that he was to meet with the Secretary of the Air Force that evening regarding the Lockheed plan. After meeting with Secretary of the Air Force Robert Seamans in which he shared his concerns regarding the Lockheed plan, Lavelle's comments quickly generated a firestorm with Ryan. Lavelle's meeting with the Secretary derailed the Lockheed plan and, in Lavelle's view, caused Ryan great embarrassment within the Pentagon. In an interview years later, Lavelle related that Ryan accused Lavelle of going behind his back to the Secretary and undermining his decision on the Lockheed plan. In Lavelle's analysis, his actions so incensed Ryan that he reversed his decision to assign Lavelle as the Commanding General of Training Command.<sup>16</sup> The Training Command assignment was a premiere assignment at the time and often resulted in officers moving on to a fourth star and bigger command assignments. Ryan told Lavelle he had "blown" the Training Command assignment, and Lavelle believed that his twenty-nine year Air Force career would soon end.

In 1970, the Air Staff assigned Lavelle as Vice Commander of Pacific Air Forces at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii. He and his wife treated the assignment as a farewell tour since they

had never been to Hawaii, and the recent events that occurred in the Pentagon with General Ryan all but ended his career. Although assigned as the Vice Commander of PACAF, Lavelle possessed no authority or responsibility to make any command decisions, which confirmed his greatest fear that he was "put out to pasture" while Ryan awaited his retirement papers.<sup>17</sup> However, less than one year into the PACAF assignment, Lavelle received the nomination for his fourth star and command of the Seventh Air Force. The nomination came as a great surprise to Lavelle, but he later contended in a post-retirement interview that the relationships he built with the Secretary of Defense and the Vietnam commanding generals while in DCPG played a significant role in his selection. Despite Ryan's displeasure with Lavelle over the Lockheed debacle, Ryan still had to nominate Lavelle for the assignment and the promotion. Before taking command in Saigon, Lavelle returned to Washington in an attempt to meet with Ryan in search of any special instructions for his new command assignment. After trying for several days to meet with Ryan, the Vice Chief of Staff explained to Lavelle that Ryan was too busy to meet with him and relayed to him that Ryan only requested he "improve the relationship with the Army."<sup>18</sup>

### **A Commander in Action**

"All of my judgments were made as a field commander acutely mindful of my often anguishing responsibility for the protection of the lives and safety of thousands of courageous young airman in my command."<sup>19</sup>

-General John D. Lavelle, Testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, September 26, 1972

On 29 July 1971, Lavelle assumed command of the Seventh Air Force. He arrived in Saigon and began his official duties as Seventh Air Force Commander on 1 August 1971. He commanded all Air Force units in Vietnam and Thailand and served as deputy commander for

air operations for the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), under Army General Creighton T. Abrams. Major General Winton W. Marshall served as Lavelle's Vice Commander during most of his tenure as Seventh Air Force Commander. Major General Alton D. Slay, the former acting commander of the Seventh Air Force, served as Lavelle's deputy chief of staff for operations and charged with relaying Lavelle's orders and directives to the wings under command of the Seventh Air Force.

Lavelle took command of the Seventh Air Force during a period of rising anti-war sentiment.<sup>20</sup> Seeking a political solution to end the war, Kissinger was holding secret negotiations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (the North Vietnamese) to put an end to the long and bloody conflict.<sup>21</sup> Kissinger knew a presidential election was looming in Washington, and Nixon had to make good on his campaign promise to put an end to the unpopular war if he was to be re-elected. After the Johnson administration suspended ROLLING THUNDER in 1968, all bombing over Northern Vietnam ceased to induce peace negotiations. Nixon continued this policy in hopes of making good on his promise to get the U.S. out of Vietnam. Additionally, Nixon and Kissinger secretly planned a diplomatic trip to the People's Republic of China (PRC) for early 1972, and any offensive action in Northern Vietnam would place diplomatic efforts with the PRC in serious jeopardy.<sup>22</sup>

The Air Force continued to execute an intensive reconnaissance campaign; however, any offensive actions were counter to the efforts of those in the Nixon White House who needed a quick end to the war. Leadership in the White House and the Pentagon established stringent rules of engagement (ROEs) that limited any form of offensive air activity and only provided pilots the authority to fire their weapons if actively engaged by the enemy.

Commanders in Saigon viewed this RoE as politically motivated and unduly restrictive while introducing great risk to U.S. aircraft and aircrews. An additional complication was that the ROEs were always changing and were never a neat list or a complete manual one could easily decipher, but a mass compilation of wires, messages, and directives that came from higher up in the chain of command.<sup>23</sup>

The central theme of all of the ROEs was the prohibition of U.S. aircraft from firing at targets in Northern Vietnam unless the aircraft were "fired" at or "activated" against by enemy radar. In the early stages of the war, the enemy missile sites maintained control of the surface-to-air missiles (SAM). U.S. pilots received warning in the cockpit from radar homing and warning (RHAW) gear when "locked on" by enemy radar giving the pilot time to react and execute evasive maneuvers before the missile launched. Once receiving fire or activated against by radar, U.S. pilots could execute a protective reaction strike in self-defense.<sup>24</sup>

Lavelle inherited a dire situation with extremely difficult and complex rules of engagement. He viewed the issue as a three-fold problem that compounded over time. First, Lavelle was up almost every night concerned for the safety of his aircrew. During the years between 1968 and 1971, the enemy began to exploit the U.S. ROE by establishing weapons arsenals and fighter bases to launch against U.S. aircraft flying in northern South Vietnam. In addition to the increased presence, by mid-to-late 1971 the Northern Vietnamese had realized great leaps in anti-air technology aiding in their execution of the war. In 1968 the enemy was unable to track U.S. aircraft effectively, however, by late 1971 leaps in technology allowed the enemy to interconnect its radars to generate specific targeting data on U.S. fighters and bombers.<sup>25</sup> The Northern Vietnamese netted the Fan Song fire-control radars with the Bar



Lock, Whiff, and Spoon Rest ground control intercept (GCI) radars. The GCI radars fed the targeting data to the Fan Song radar, allowing the Fan Song radar to remain off until missile launch. The RHAW gear in U.S. aircraft gave pilots warning if tracked by the Fan Song radar; however, it could not detect emissions from the GCI radar. This gave pilots little warning of a missile launch and made flying significantly more hazardous to U.S. aircrews.<sup>26</sup> Addressing the concern over the safety of his airmen, Lavelle made numerous requests for relief from the standing ROE to execute the bombing of SAM sites, fighter bases, and AAA sites that unduly jeopardized the missions and aircrews. The Pentagon denied each request and instead scolded him each time for not being more aggressive in executing the air campaign.

The second fold of Lavelle's problem was the rise of Northern Vietnamese aggression as they prepared for offensive action to occur later in the dry season. In late 1971 and early 1972, the Northern Vietnamese began building up forces and equipment near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) preparing for the "Easter Offensive" in the spring of 1972. After the addition of thousands of SAM and antiaircraft batteries, the Northern Vietnamese fired more than 200 surface-to-air missiles at U.S. aircraft between November and February; an increase of 20 over the same time frame in the previous year.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, the number of incursions with enemy MiGs increased by a factor of 15 as well.<sup>28</sup> In the dry season of 1971-72 (November – March), Hanoi successfully downed eight aircraft and forced U.S. reconnaissance missions to employ multiple escort fighters to counter the expanding threats to pilots.<sup>29</sup> Northern Vietnamese aggression had reached an all time high with no foreseeable end to the elevating threat. Abrams and Lavelle notified leaders in the Pentagon of the North's build up and intelligence warning of a pending attack, however, Pentagon leadership ignored the warnings and again

denied all requests to address the threat through expanded offensive activity in the air campaign.

The final fold of Lavelle's problem was the Pentagon's continued pressure for increased aggressiveness in the air campaign, which was a common theme with message traffic and high-level visitors to Saigon. Air power was now the focal point in the Vietnam War and would serve as the final blow to induce Northern Vietnam to negotiate an end to the conflict.<sup>30</sup> Recent combat losses and enemy activity generated media coverage that did not corroborate the message Nixon's political machine had advertised to the American public. The Southern Vietnamese were in charge of their own defense and the Americans were coming home.

On numerous occasions, the message from the Pentagon was that the standing ROE encompassed ample authority to execute the war successfully, if one interpreted it properly. In early November 1971, three months into Lavelle's tour, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, visited commanders in Saigon. During the visit, Admiral Moorer endorsed a plan to attack the MiG airfield at Dong Hoi. After the strike, Admiral Moorer and General Ryan, as well as other leaders in the Pentagon, reviewed the results of the attack without ever questioning its pre-planned nature. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) only suggested more careful planning in future attacks.<sup>31</sup>

Later in November 1971, General Bruce Holloway, the Commander in Chief of Strategic Air Command, took the unprecedented action of grounding all Air Force B-52s in Vietnam out of fear for the safety of his aircrews. Holloway contended his crews were at greater risk due to increased aggression by the Northern Vietnamese MiGs.<sup>32</sup> Holloway's decision forced the JCS to address the issue of aircrew safety in Vietnam, and was the catalyst for a commander's

conference in Honolulu, Hawaii in early December 1971. During the conference, Lieutenant General John Vogt, director of staff for the JCS, scolded field commanders for lacking flexibility in interpreting the existing authorities provided by the standing ROE. Vogt also highlighted that the JCS would not question any targets or resultant damage from protective reaction strikes.<sup>33</sup>

Subsequently, three days following the conference Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird visited Lavelle in Saigon and reinforced the need for him to make a more liberal interpretation of the ROE in the field. Laird told him that he should not come back to the Pentagon and request additional authorities under the current political climate, and assured Lavelle he would “back him up” with his liberal interpretation of the ROE. Laird also stated it would be very unlikely that his staff would question Lavelle’s actions while executing any liberal interpretation of the ROE.<sup>34</sup>

After the Honolulu conference in December of 1971, Lavelle established his own interpretation of the ROE based on the emerging threat presented by the capability of the North Vietnamese to network their the Fan Song fire-control radars with their GCI radars and attack U.S. aircraft without notice. Specifically, Lavelle redefined “activated against” by contending the GCI radars remained on; and that enemy radars engaged U.S. aircraft everytime a pilot flew a mission into Northern Vietnam, thereby authorizing pilots to execute a protective reaction strike in self-defense.<sup>35</sup>

As Northern Vietnamese aggression expanded, so did Lavelle’s interpretation of the ROE to protect his aircrews. On 23 January 1972, Lavelle ordered a planned protective reaction strike against a MiG at Dong Hoi airfield that routinely threatened U.S. aircraft. The strike was successful; however, the exchange that occurred in the command post after the mission will

forever serve as the cornerstone for the Lavelle case. During the return flight, the pilot reported, "Expended all ordnance, the mission was successful, no enemy reaction."<sup>36</sup> Lavelle, present at the command post that evening, immediately snapped, "We cannot report no reaction...he must always report enemy reaction!"<sup>37</sup> Subsequently, Lavelle pulled Major General Slay, deputy chief of staff for operations, aside in the command post and reinforced the need for every mission flown to report an enemy reaction. Slay claimed to fully understand the meaning of his commander's directive and issued the same direction out to all wing commanders. Time would ultimately prove that Slay misunderstood the meaning of Lavelle's order, and set into motion a pattern of questionable behavior throughout the command. Although Lavelle failed to explain his direction clearly, he defined enemy reaction as the hostile GCI radar that activated on his pilots during every U.S. mission flown.<sup>38</sup>

What initially started as protective reaction strikes in self-defense of his pilots, quickly expanded to planned protective reaction strikes against SAM sites, AAA batteries, and targets that possessed military value but represented no threat to U.S. aircraft. Additionally, the pre-planned protective reaction strikes involved planning details that included addressing weapons loads, specific routes in and out of the strike area, dive angles, and specific aim points.<sup>39</sup> Pilots executed the missions as planned and, as ordered, reported hostile enemy reaction on every operational report filed. On numerous occasions, aircrews felt compelled to fabricate stories of hostile enemy fire and reported different targets from what they actually engaged during the mission to fulfill Lavelle's orders regarding operational reporting.<sup>40</sup> Units archived all of the operational reports generated by aircrew for administrative purposes to maintain an accurate record of sorties flown. In contrast, wing commanders prepared Special category messages or

"Specats" forwarded up the chain to senior leadership in MACV, Seventh Air Force, PACAF, and the Pentagon for evaluation and review. The Specats prepared by the wing commanders and wing staff reflected true and accurate data regarding each of the protective reaction strikes.

As the planned protective reaction strikes continued, so did the falsification of operational reports by aircrews that misunderstood the intent of Lavelle's order regarding enemy reaction. The reporting requirement finally surfaced as an issue when an Airman in the Intelligence Division of the 432<sup>nd</sup> Tactical Reconnaissance Wing completed the task of debriefing crewmembers returning from a mission. When he asked whether they received hostile fire the crew responded, "No, we didn't, but we have to report it anyway."<sup>41</sup> The Airman initially challenged the requirement to falsify the reports, however, after meeting with his immediate supervisor and officer in charge received a direct order to comply with the reporting requirement. The wing inspector general, also the vice wing commander, complied with the reporting requirements leading the Airman to believe he had no real avenue to address his concern up the chain of command.

During the same timeframe, granting the authority to execute planned protective reaction strikes surfaced in the Nixon White House to induce the North Vietnamese to come to the negotiating table. On 3 February 1972, Nixon addressed the issue in the Oval Office with Kissinger and Ambassador Ellsworth F. Bunker, the U.S. envoy to Saigon. Bunker requested additional authority for protective reaction strikes on behalf of General Abrams, which the president granted during the meeting. As highlighted in the White House tape transcripts released in 2007 (Appendix B), Nixon clearly granted the authority for the planned reaction strikes and expanded the terminology to "preventive reaction" strikes. During the discussion,

Nixon and Kissinger highlighted the necessity for secrecy in executing the expanded authority fearing the news of increased bombing might send the wrong message to the American public regarding the end of the war. Nixon concluded the meeting with Bunker discussing the expanded authorities and stating, "Do it, but don't say anything."<sup>42</sup> A few days later, Admiral Moorer sent a top-secret message (Appendix C) to commanders in Saigon highlighting the expanded authorities and the mandate of secrecy surrounding the ROE change.<sup>43</sup> This is the only formal communication Lavelle would ever receive regarding Nixon's approval to expand the ROE to include protective reaction strikes.

The intelligence specialist in the 432<sup>nd</sup> Tactical Reconnaissance Wing continued to follow orders over the next two months and falsified operational reports from the planned protective reaction strikes. Genuinely disturbed by the reporting requirements and his role in these actions, on 25 February 1972 he wrote a letter to Senator Harold E. Hughes (Democrat-Iowa) to report the incidents and ROE violations. Senator Hughes sent the letter to Senator W. Stuart Symington (Democrat-Missouri) who forwarded it to Secretary of the Air Force Robert Seamans. The letter made it into the hands of the Air Force Chief of Staff General John Ryan on 8 March 1972.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Fall of a Commander**

"No way. I consider myself, well, I know I was a very popular commander, and the people down the line were trying to do what they thought I wanted. Somebody, somewhere, and certainly not that captain, made a foolish mistake, probably me, but the last thing in the world that will ever happen is to have an investigation. If we did anything wrong in the Seventh Air Force, it's my fault and there will be no My Lai in the Air Force."<sup>45</sup>

-General John D. Lavelle, April 1978, Air Force Oral History Interview

General Ryan immediately dispatched the Air Force Inspector General (IG), Lieutenant General Louis Wilson, to Saigon to investigate the allegations outlined in the letter.<sup>46</sup> Over the next week, Wilson interviewed everyone involved with the allegations to include pilots, aircrews, intelligence officers, wing commanders, Major General Slay, and Lavelle. Lavelle provided detailed rationale regarding his liberal interpretation of the ROE; however, Wilson disagreed as he had already accepted the publicly advertised ROE as the basis for his investigation. Additionally, Wilson surprised Lavelle with the falsified reports he provided for review during the meeting. Lavelle had never seen or heard of these reports and was completely unaware of their existence until the meeting with Wilson. Lavelle discovered the operational reports required a level of detail that prevented pilots from listing hostile enemy radar as an enemy reaction. The stringent design and high level of detail in the reports required aircrews to falsify the documents to comply with Lavelle's orders. Although Lavelle adamantly objected to the ROE violations outlined in the IG report, he assumed full responsibility for the miscommunication within his command that led to the falsified operational reports. He further stated his orders were unclear and subject to misinterpretation, and that the issue occurred in his command making it entirely his fault as the commander.<sup>47</sup>

The outcome of Wilson's report concluded Lavelle violated the ROE and ordered the falsification of the operational reports to cover up the ROE violations. Wilson reported his findings to Ryan on 20 March 1972. Ryan immediately summoned Lavelle back to Washington to discuss the IG report and allegations of ROE violations and false reporting within the Seventh Air Force.<sup>48</sup> On 21 March 1972, a day after the Pentagon received the IG report; Admiral Moorer sent a second top-secret message to commanders in Saigon. The mysterious message

stated the protective reaction strikes were receiving significant attention in the U.S. media and rescinded the secret ROE change that took effect less than two months earlier.<sup>49</sup>

On Sunday, 26 March 1972, Lavelle returned to Washington and reported to Ryan's personal quarters as directed. Ryan and Lavelle debated the detail and validity of each of the alleged ROE violations listed in the IG report prepared by Wilson. After a lengthy exchange, Ryan conceded that the alleged ROE violations were partially unjustified, but abruptly informed Lavelle that it was the issue of false reporting under his command that required him to take disciplinary action. Ryan relieved Lavelle of command of the Seventh Air Force for the violations outlined in the IG report and offered him the option of retiring as a lieutenant general (3-star) or accepting reassignment in his permanent grade of major general (2-star).<sup>50</sup> Lavelle refused to do so and demanded to meet with Secretary of Defense Laird or Secretary of the Air Force Seaman to present his case. Ryan agreed to schedule the meeting during the coming week for Lavelle to meet with the civilian leaders. Lavelle attempted for four consecutive days to meet with either Laird or Seaman but both secretaries ultimately refused to meet with him. After Ryan expressed to him that his continued pursuit of the matter would likely result in disciplinary action for others under his command, Lavelle agreed to retire in the grade of lieutenant general.<sup>51</sup> Subsequently, Lavelle received his retirement physical that identified he had coronary artery disease, a heart murmur, emphysema, and numerous other serious health ailments. At the conclusion of the retirement physical, Ryan released a message on 7 April 1972 stating that Lavelle was retiring for personal and health reasons. Lieutenant General John Vogt replaced Lavelle as the Seventh Air Force commander.<sup>52</sup> All of the



mentioned actions occurred without Nixon or Kissinger ever receiving notification of the alleged violations that resulted in the firing of Lavelle as the Seventh Air Force Commander.<sup>53</sup>

The following months proved to be a tumultuous period for Lavelle and the U.S. Air Force. On 15 May 1972, Congressman Otis Pike (Democrat-New York) gave a speech on the floor of the House of the Representatives calling for General Ryan and the Pentagon to tell the truth about Lavelle's retirement. Congressman Pike challenged the claim that Lavelle's retirement was for personal and health reasons and called for congressional hearings on the matter.<sup>54</sup> Ryan immediately responded with a second press release regarding Lavelle's retirement stating he was relieved due to "irregularities in the conduct of his command responsibilities."<sup>55</sup> The media got wind of the letter to Senator Hughes and the subsequent removal of Lavelle. *New York Times* reporter Seymour Hersh led a charge in the media claiming Lavelle was relieved of command and retired with a demotion for fighting his own war in Vietnam through repeated unauthorized bombing campaigns in violation of the ROE established by the president. Hersh highlighted this was the first time in U.S. military history a four-star general had been retired at a lower grade for disciplinary reasons.<sup>56</sup> Hersh's article was the first of countless articles as the Lavelle scandal controlled the media for the remainder of 1972.

On 12 June 1972, the House Armed Services Committee summoned only Generals Ryan and Lavelle to testify with regards to the latter's retirement and allegations of false reporting and ROE violations. Ryan testified that Lavelle clearly violated the ROEs in place since 1968 and was the impetus for the falsified operational reporting in his command. Ryan also stated that before relieving Lavelle as Commander of Seventh Air Force, he had received personal

assurances from Secretary Laird, Admiral Moorer, Admiral McCain, and General Abrams that they had not granted any authority for Lavelle to deviate from the ROE as written. Conversely, Lavelle testified he had authorization for the protective reaction strikes under a liberal interpretation of the ROE urged by those in the Pentagon, and that this same interpretation generated detailed strike reports that produced no inquiries from Pentagon leadership.<sup>57</sup> Lavelle fully explained before the committee that the confusion regarding the operational reports was a miscommunication on his part and was the catalyst for the erroneous and falsified reporting that followed under his command.

Leading up to the testimony by Generals Ryan and Lavelle, it was clear the Pentagon adopted a strategy of banding together at the highest level and stonewalling the congressional investigation using a cloud of secrecy. Those on the committee, as well as Lavelle, requested copies of the ROE, classified DOD messages supporting Lavelle's claims, and other key documentation relevant to the case. The DOD refused to provide any of the requested documents and at one point even refused to divulge the location of Lavelle to obtain his testimony.<sup>58</sup> The DOD initially claimed the secrecy imposed was partly to protect Lavelle from certain embarrassment.<sup>59</sup> In the end, the House Subcommittee found in favor of Lavelle and the actions he exercised in discharging his command responsibilities. However, while they accepted his explanation regarding the false reports, the subcommittee stated he was ultimately responsible for the miscommunication that generated the false reporting under his command.<sup>60</sup>

The investigation and hearings by the House Subcommittee continued to fuel a media craze and sparked the call for a full formal Senate inquiry. Further, many in the Senate called

for a court-martial of Lavelle for violating the principal of civilian control of the military.<sup>61</sup> The scandal controlled the front-pages with some calling Vietnam "Lavelle's War", while others labeled him the scapegoat for a Pentagon routinely dishonest with the American public regarding Vietnam. In 2007, White House tape transcripts (Appendix D), the president voiced frustration that the Pentagon and Secretary Laird made Lavelle the fall guy in Vietnam for taking the aggressive steps the White House had demanded from the air war. However, Nixon ultimately followed the Pentagon's lead later that same month by publicly claiming that Lavelle exceeded the ROE, and "it was proper for him to be relieved and retired... and will assure this type of activity may not occur in the future".<sup>62</sup>

The full Senate hearing in September 1972 transpired like the testimony in the House with the exception of those subpoenaed to testify. Generals Ryan and Lavelle shared their same version of the story as they had in the House testimony. The DOD continued to hold back any formal documentation not destroyed in the case as the entire upper echelon of the military, to include Admiral Moorer, Admiral McCain, and General Abrams, prepared to testify in the full Senate hearings. Military leaders continued their strategy of banding together denying all knowledge of the ROE violations and any role they played in encouraging the liberal interpretation that led to the alleged violations. Each of these senior officers stuck to the story; the ROE had been in place since 1968 and the White House had only relaxed the ROEs twice for offensive action. Each officer maintained any liberal interpretation of the ROE made by Lavelle was solely his interpretation without counsel from any of them. Further complicating the matter, the Senate suspended action on all nominations because of the Lavelle case. This extraordinary action effected the nomination of Admiral Moorer to his second term as the

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the retirement of Admiral McCain at his 4-star rank, and the nomination of General Abrams as the Army's next Chief of Staff; a post left vacant by the retirement of General Westmoreland.<sup>63</sup> Each of these senior officers clearly had a career or retirement of their own to protect and did not want to be the one to break ranks with the Pentagon's position that Lavelle must take the fall for Vietnam.

After 18 days of testimony, the Senate hearings would end with a vote on the nomination to retire Lavelle at the rank of Lieutenant General, the rank Ryan claimed he last performed satisfactorily. On 6 October 1972, the Senate concluded with a vote of 14-2 to return the nomination back to the Air Force without action and ultimately forced Lavelle to retire in his permanent grade of major general.<sup>64</sup> Subsequently, Secretary of the Air Force Seamans dismissed court-martial charges brought against Lavelle by the intelligence Airman in the 432<sup>nd</sup> Tactical Reconnaissance Wing and another junior ranking officer in the Air Force. No other officers or service members ever received any form of investigation or punishment in the Lavelle case.

On 30 March 1972, a week after Lavelle's recall to Washington and just one month after Secretary Laird testified that there was no serious threat of a Northern Vietnamese attack, the Northern Vietnamese came across the DMZ launching the massive "Easter Offensive" against South Vietnam. The U.S. promptly abandoned its policy of protective reaction and issued unrestricted authority for the Seventh Air Force to bomb targets in North Vietnam. Over the next month, Air Force B-52s flew more than 700 missions over the communist territory. Missions that include targets labeled "Lavelle Raids" a month earlier and the very basis for which the Pentagon destroyed a man's career.<sup>65</sup>

## Faults of a Commander

"Mr. Chairman it is not pleasant to contemplate ending a long and distinguished military career with a catastrophic blemish on my record – a blemish for conscientiously doing the job I believe I was expected to do, and doing it with a minimum loss of American lives."<sup>66</sup>

-General John D. Lavelle, Testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, 26 September 1972

"When you called me regarding the case, I believe my first words about Lavelle were, "He got screwed." They will also do for my last."<sup>67</sup>

-Former Congress Otis G. Pike

Finding fault in the actions of Lavelle is not easy. Research proved that the President of the United States and the entire upper echelon of the U.S. military turned against Lavelle for purposes of self-preservation and political protection. From November 1971 to March 1972, the U.S. flew more than 25,000 sorties over Northern Vietnam. Twenty-nine of these sorties, or .00116%, are the centerpiece for the case against Lavelle and his alleged violation of the standing ROE.<sup>68</sup> Of the twenty-nine alleged violations, only four of the sorties lacked documented proof that Lavelle had specific guidance from his leadership authorizing the strikes. These four sorties occurred from 23-31 January 1972, after visits from Secretary Laird and Admiral Moorer urging Lavelle to exercise a more liberal interpretation of the existing ROE. A May 2007 letter from Secretary Laird (Appendix E) confirms he urged Lavelle to view the ROE regarding protective strikes liberally.<sup>69</sup>

The four sorties lacking documentation included the infamous case of Lavelle's order to his aircrews to report "enemy reaction" on every sortie flown. Lavelle routinely accepted responsibility for the subsequent falsified reports explaining they occurred because of a miscommunication that left his orders subject to interpretation by those under him. However, the issue goes much deeper than a miscommunication as it modified the behavior of the entire

command. If guilty of anything, Lavelle was guilty of unknowingly establishing a climate of leadership in his command that lacked integrity by its people. By accident or on purpose, the results of his actions were the same.

Those present during his order to always report "enemy reaction" actually interpreted their commander to say, "lie on the operational reports so we don't get into trouble for bending the rules." When explaining to others why the reports were completed the way they were, it was widely understood in the command that Lavelle ordered them to lie on the reports. The wing leadership and aircrews actually believed that following Lavelle's orders made them part of a very secret plan to bend the rules and to win the war. By some standards, their lack of integrity had a purpose and a cause, and they were part of the team doing what everyone from the top down was doing for the cause. In turn, those looking in from the outside were able to build the story of a rogue commander who fought his own war and covered his actions by ordering his airmen to lie on operational reports. Lavelle never purposely intended for this erosion of integrity fueled by misunderstanding, however, it would only be a matter of time before this climate of dishonesty and corruption would present itself in all facets of the Seventh Air Force mission. As the commander, he was responsible for the standard of integrity in his command, and ultimately failed the very people he was notorious for trying to protect.

## **Conclusion**

"If anybody really wanted the total story or wanted the true story, no effort was made to gather it by historians, by the Senate, by the press, by the Air Force. But it's there if anybody wants to gather it."<sup>70</sup>

-General John D. Lavelle, April 1978, Air Force Oral History Interview

In 1972, the White House and the Pentagon needed a scapegoat to bridge the gap between the politicians and the American people. Managing a very unpopular war during an election year had everyone operating under a blanket of secrecy to prevent the American public from knowing the truth about Vietnam. The president promised he was bringing our troops home. As the story broke showing evidence of a very different war, the single letter from an Airman in Thailand set off a chain of events that captured a nation and ruined the career of a highly decorated Air Force officer. A chain of events that one could argue was the direct result of a miscommunication straight from the commander himself. From the White House to the Pentagon, self-preservation became the mode of operation, and the nation's leadership invested everything into letting one man take the fall for the mistruths of the unpopular war.

To this day, Kissinger and other White House staffers maintain that the president never granted the expanded authority for protective reaction strikes and argue the statements and information derived from the White House tapes are distorted and out of context.<sup>71</sup> Lavelle supporters dispute Kissinger's comments arguing he is merely maintaining the course as he did forty years ago. In the end, the actions of the commander sparked the controversy and ultimately painted Lavelle and his command in a negative light. While Lavelle's superiors turned on him denying any part in the ROE violations, the story lacked supporting evidence and impact without the false reporting alleged to cover up the ROE violations. The two issues combined to complement each other fueling a perfect storm that presented the White House and the Pentagon with the ideal fall guy during a politically tenuous election year. Human nature drives one to focus on the actions of Lavelle and the injustice he endured at the hands of

the nation's leadership, however, his own notable failure as a commander would likely have warranted the same fate and discipline he received in the end. As a military leader, one accepts the job as commander understanding that "not knowing" and ignorance is never an acceptable defense for failure in command. General Lavelle endured a grave injustice by his leadership and the American public, however, this does not excuse his own failures as a commander and the accountability that accompanies the responsibility of command at all levels.

General John D. Lavelle passed away from a heart attack on 10 July 1979 at the age of 62. Up until his death, Lavelle maintained, "I did what was right. I did what was authorized."<sup>72</sup> On 22 December 2010, the Senate Armed Services Committee returned Lavelle's nomination to the White House for additional review by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. Led by ranking member Senator John McCain (Republican – Arizona), son of the retired Admiral John McCain implicated in the Lavelle case as Commander in Chief Pacific Command, the SASC cited inconsistencies in the record including testimony and statements of senior civilian and military leaders as the basis for returning the nomination. Mary J. Lavelle, 92 years of age and of very poor health, vowed to continue to fight with the assistance of her children to clear the name of her husband, General John D. Lavelle.<sup>73</sup> The White House, DOD, and Air Force have released no official statement regarding any future actions in the case of General John D. Lavelle.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John D. Lavelle Jr., Letters to the Editor: Lavelle Response, Air Force-Magazine.com, <http://www.airforce-magazine.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/2007/January2007/0107letters.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> John T. Correll, "Lavelle," *Air Force Magazine*, November 2006, 58.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. *Record of Proceedings, Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records: John D. Lavelle (Deceased)* by Barbara A. Westgate, Pentagon, Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 2009, 4. Cited hereafter as "Board Proceedings."

<sup>4</sup> "Board Proceedings," 5.

<sup>5</sup> "Board Proceedings," 9.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), <http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=13774>

<sup>7</sup> Lavelle, John D., Interviewed by Lieutenant Colonel John N. Dick, April 17-24, 1978, Office of Air Force History, Headquarters U.S. Air Force; transcript, page 682, United States Air Force Oral History Program. Cited hereafter as Dick, "Lavelle Interview."

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Air Force, Senior Leader Biographies, Biography of Major General John D. Lavelle, <http://www.af.mil/information/bios>. Cited hereafter as Lavelle, "Official Biography"

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Application for Correction of an Injustice and Military Record under the Provisions of Title 10 U.S. Code Section 1552: John Daniel Lavelle* by Mary J. Lavelle. Marshall, Virginia, September 2008, 4. Cited hereafter as Lavelle, "Application."

<sup>10</sup> Lavelle, "Official Biography," 1.

<sup>11</sup> Lavelle, "Official Biography," 2.

<sup>12</sup> Dick, "Lavelle Interview," 418.

<sup>13</sup> Dick, "Lavelle Interview," 454.

<sup>14</sup> Dick, "Lavelle Interview," 529.

<sup>15</sup> Dick, "Lavelle Interview," 531.

<sup>16</sup> Dick, "Lavelle Interview," 535.

<sup>17</sup> Dick, "Lavelle Interview," 539.

<sup>18</sup> Dick, "Lavelle Interview," 553.

<sup>19</sup> Senate, *Nomination of John D. Lavelle, General Creighton W. Abrams, and Admiral John S. McCain*, "Testimony of Lavelle," September 26, 1972.

<sup>20</sup> Correlle, 59.

<sup>21</sup> Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1979), 1037-38.

<sup>22</sup> Kissinger, 1042-43.

<sup>23</sup> Correll, 59.

<sup>24</sup> House Committee on Armed Services, Investigations Subcommittee, Hearing on H.R. 201, *Unauthorized Bombing of Military Targets in Northern Vietnam*, 92d Cong., 2d Sess., 1972, 33.

<sup>25</sup> Wayne Thompson, *To Hanoi and Back: The United States and Northern Vietnam 1966-1973* (Washington DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2000), 204-05.

<sup>26</sup> Correll, 60.

<sup>27</sup> Marshall L. Michel III, *Clashes: Air Combat Over North Vietnam, 1965-1972* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 234.

<sup>28</sup> Correll, 60.

<sup>29</sup> Dick, "Lavelle Interview," 570.

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, 204-05.

<sup>31</sup> Casey, 137.

<sup>32</sup> Thompson, 206..

<sup>33</sup> Correll, 60.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson 206.

<sup>35</sup> Correll, 60.

<sup>36</sup> Casey, 142.

<sup>37</sup> Casey, 142.

<sup>38</sup> Aloysius Casey and Patrick Casey, "Lavelle, Nixon, and the White House Tapes," *Air Force Magazine*, February 2007, 88.

<sup>39</sup> Correlle, 60.

<sup>40</sup> Casey, 88.

<sup>41</sup> Casey, 88.

<sup>42</sup> Casey, 146.

<sup>43</sup> Casey 149.

<sup>44</sup> Correll, 62.

<sup>45</sup> Dick, "Lavelle Interview," 654.

<sup>46</sup> Correll, 62.

<sup>47</sup> Casey, 162.

<sup>48</sup> Casey, 150.

<sup>49</sup> Casey, 150.

<sup>50</sup> Dick, "Lavelle Interview," 642.

<sup>51</sup> Lavelle, "Application," 23.

<sup>52</sup> Lavelle, "Application," 25.

<sup>53</sup> Richard M. Nixon, White House Tapes Transcripts, June 14, 1972. Nixon White House Tapes and Archives, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. Nixon Oral History Collection.

<sup>54</sup> Casey, 151.

<sup>55</sup> Lee E. Deremer, "Leadership Between a Rock and a Hard Place," *Airpower Journal*, Fall 1996, 90.

<sup>56</sup> Casey, 151.

<sup>57</sup> Lavelle, "Application," 26.

<sup>58</sup> House Committee on Armed Services, Investigations Subcommittee, Hearing on H.R. 201, *Unauthorized Bombing of Military Targets in Northern Vietnam*, 92d Cong., 2d Sess., 1972, Exhibit K, 7.

<sup>59</sup> Lavelle, "Application," 27.

<sup>60</sup> House Committee on Armed Services, Investigations Subcommittee, Hearing on H.R. 201, *Unauthorized Bombing of Military Targets in Northern Vietnam*, 92d Cong., 2d Sess., 1972, 9.

<sup>61</sup> Casey, 152.

<sup>62</sup> Lavelle, "Application," 30.

<sup>63</sup> Lavelle, "Application," 31.

<sup>64</sup> Correll, 64.

<sup>65</sup> Correll, 64.

<sup>66</sup> Senate, *Nomination of John D. Lavelle, General Creighton W. Abrams, and Admiral John S. McCain*, "Testimony of Lavelle," September 26, 1972.

<sup>67</sup> Otis G. Pike, Latest Events Regarding General John D. Lavelle: Pike Letter, MBK Law, <http://www.mbklaw.com/events/lavelle/>.

<sup>68</sup> Casey, 156.

<sup>69</sup> Melvin Laird, Letters to the Editor: Laird Response, Air Force-Magazine.com, <http://www.airforce-magazine.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/2007/May%202007/0507letters.aspx>.

<sup>70</sup> Dick, "Lavelle Interview," 693.

<sup>71</sup> Craig Whitlock, "Senate Panels Stalls on restoration of Vietnam-era Lavelle's stars," *Washington Post*, December 22, 2010.

<sup>72</sup> Dick, "Lavelle Interview," 692.

<sup>73</sup> Craig Whitlock, "Senate Panels Stalls on restoration of Vietnam-era Lavelle's stars," *Washington Post*, December 22, 2010.

Appendix A: Letter from Former SASC General Counsel

**ORIGINAL COPY OF DOCUMENT ATTACHED ON FOLLOWING PAGES**

Source: James Woolsey, Latest Events Regarding General John D. Lavelle: Woolsey Letter, MBK Law, <http://www.mbklaw.com/events/lavelle/>.

**General John D. Lavelle, USAF**  
**1916 – 1979**

**Letter from R. James Woolsey**  
**June 11, 2008**

Address  
Redacted

June 11, 2008

Board for Correction of Air Force Records  
SAF/MRBR  
550-C Street West, Suite 40  
Randolph, AFB, TX 78150-4742

In re: Application of Mrs. John D. Lavelle for the correction of a military record

Dear Members of the Board:

I write in support of Mrs. Lavelle's above application. The following is submitted pursuant to 28 U.S.C. Section 1746.

By way of introduction, I was General Counsel to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services 1970-73 and I led the investigation of the events that were relevant to General Lavelle's confirmation hearing in 1972 to be advanced on the retired list from two stars to three. My resume is attached. I am currently in the venture capital field, but following my three years as General Counsel of the Committee, interspersed with 22 years of law practice, I served in the US Government for 12 years in national security-related positions, in two Democratic and two Republican administrations, including as Under Secretary of the Navy (1977-79) and Director of Central Intelligence (1993-95).

The release of the White House tapes from the Nixon administration and a recent letter by former Secretary of Defense Laird published in Air Force Magazine (May 2007) cast substantial new light, in my view, on the assumptions behind the decision by the Committee in 1972 not to recommend to the Senate that General Lavelle be advanced on the retired list. The Committee acted in good faith, given the information it had at the time, but the newly available material now makes it clear that its decision was not based on accurate information.

Nineteen seventy-two was a year of great stress on the senior decision-makers in the US Government: it was a year of brutal combat in Vietnam, in which air power played a central role, a Presidential election year, and the year of President Nixon's historic trip to China. The tapes and Secretary Laird's letter, however, make quite clear something of central importance to the Committee's decision about General Lavelle that

was unknown at the time to me, and to the best of my knowledge to the entire Committee: General Lavelle was given explicit authorization by the chain of command, from the President on down, to interpret the then-current Rules of Engagement (ROE) for "protective reaction strikes", in Secretary Laird's word "liberally". Secretary Laird goes further and stresses in his letter that "[t]he new orders permitted hitting anti-aircraft installations and other dangerous targets if spotted on their missions, whether they were activated or not."

Secretary Laird's letter also points out that JCS Chairman Moorer, General Abrams, and General Wheeler "all agreed with the liberal interpretation on my order on protective reaction." This fits with General Lavelle's later recollection of his conversation with Secretary Laird when the latter, visiting Saigon in December 1971, "told me I should make a liberal interpretation of the rules of engagement in the field and not come to Washington and ask him, under the political climate, to come out with an interpretation; I should make them in the field and he would back me up." Further, General Lavelle also later recalled that he had conveyed this information to General Abrams who "said he agreed with Secretary Laird." This now seems to be part of a pattern in late 1971 and early 1972 as field commanders (e.g. CINCPAC, Admiral John McCain) would seek additional written authority for preplanned strikes and although the JCS, e.g. via its representative Lt. Gen. John Vogt, would chastise combat commanders for not making full use of their authorities, the Pentagon would provide no additional written authority for pre-planned strikes. (That is, other than the openly pre-planned occasional stretches of "limited duration" strikes.)

Secretary Laird's and General Lavelle's understanding as of early 1972 was quite logical given what we now know from the White House tapes about meetings there on this same subject. For example, in the WH meeting of February 3, 1972, between the President, National Security Adviser Kissinger, and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, wherein Ambassador Bunker explained the importance of pre-planning strikes in order to protect our aircraft effectively, the President said, "He [General Abrams] is to call all of these things protective reaction. Just call it protective reaction. Alright? Because preventive reaction. I am simply saying that we expand the definition of protective reaction to mean preventive reaction where a SAM site is concerned. And I think that, that, to be sure that anything that goes down there, just call it ordinary protective reaction."

The President stressed in this meeting the sensitivity of the issue: "tell the military not to put out extensive briefings with regard to our military activities from now until we get back from China." He underlined that "He [Abrams] can hit SAM sites period. Okay? But he is not to do it with a public declaration. Alright? And if it does get out, to the extent it does, he says it's a protective reaction strike."



June 11, 2008

Page 4

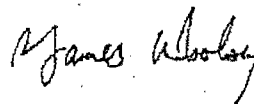
that General Lavelle intended by his remark to indicate that, if there had been no activation of a missile site radar the pilots should designate the activation of a GCI radar as the "enemy reaction". If one considers only the written ROE and the information that the administration was making public, this designation would imply a very broad authority since the GCI radars were essentially continuously activated. But if one considers the verbal orders of the President and the Secretary of Defense, General Lavelle's notion of designating the GCI radar activation as the "enemy reaction" was clearly within his authority.

The false reporting on the OPREP-4's occurred because these reports were not seen nor used by the senior officers in the command structure, and the "specat" reports that were so seen and used were accurate. Apparently the format of the OPREP-4's was incompatible with designating GCI radar activation as "enemy reaction" and so at the level of the air crews and the non-commissioned officers who debriefed them the practice began of inventing missile site radars or anti-aircraft sites to provide the "enemy reaction". The chain of command below General Lavelle did not operate properly in such a way as to bring this to his attention - and he always took full responsibility for this failure.

But it is important to understand that the only offense of which General Lavelle was in fact guilty was not being sufficiently informed about the format of some computer data forms. He was in fact reporting the pre-planned strikes accurately in the specats, and he was not stretching the authority given to him verbally to conduct the pre-planned strikes by the President (via Ambassador Bunker) and the Secretary of Defense.

Had I understood this in 1972 I would have recommended to the Committee that General Lavelle should have been advanced on the retired list to his full rank. I feel confident that such a recommendation would have been approved by the Committee. The President's anguish in his conversations with Dr. Kissinger and General Haig reflect what, I believe, would have been the Committee members' feelings as well at the time they voted. I strongly urge that the injustice done to General Lavelle finally be corrected.

Sincerely,



R. James Woolsey

**Appendix B: White House Tape Transcript – 3 February 1972**

**ORIGINAL COPY OF DOCUMENT ATTACHED ON FOLLOWING PAGES**

Source: Richard M. Nixon. White House Tapes Transcripts. Nixon White House Tapes and Archives, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. Nixon Oral History Collection.

**General John D. Lavelle, USAF  
1916 – 1979**

**Transcript of audio-taped conversation of  
February 3, 1972 of  
President Richard Nixon,  
Dr. Henry A. Kissinger, &  
Ambassador Ellsworth F. Bunker**

---

3 February 1972, Thursday  
White House  
Time: 10:53 am - 11:33 am  
Location: Oval Office

665-3

---

The President meets with Ellsworth F. Bunker and Henry A. Kissinger

---

EB It's also, that's it, they've done an increasingly good job on this interdiction. The, the trucks they get, the throughput, is a small proportion of the input.

EB On this question of the bombing that involve B-52s. The bombing of the SAM sites becomes important. And one thing, and both Gen. Abrams and I want is . . . if we could get authority to, to bomb these SAM sites. Now the authority is for bomb when, when they fire at aircraft.

RN I saw that.

EB Now, when the radar's locked on. . . but the problem is, that that's, that's late to start attacking. And the other problem is weather, you've got to see it. Now a, you know sometimes you only get an hour a day.

RN Well, my point is that I think protection reaction is, can, should include a the right of the and Abrams might want to, to do something about it, it's stupid the right to hit SAM sites, in other-protective reaction should include preventative reaction.

HK I think

EB It's a hard thing.

HK I think the way to handle it, Mr. President. I haven't had a chance to talk to Ellsworth yet, is that. One is to give them a blanket authority, that has the disadvantage of

RN To get out.

HK . . . of getting out and also of at least doing something with the aircraft. The other is. A right now they can hit only when the radar is locked on,

RN Yea.

HK . . . and that's very restrictive because that means that the plane which is in trouble also has to fire. The third possibility is to say Abrams can hit any SAM site that has locked on even if it is no longer locked on. Other words,

EB Yea.

HK and use high explosives too--right now they can use only Shrikes

EB This one thing we would like to do.

RN Sure, sure.

(It sounds as if Ambassador Bunker is directing the President's attention to a map in which Ambassador Bunker identifies SAM sites)

EB . . . Here are these locations of these SAM sites here.

RN Have all of these fired at some time on our planes?

EB No, they haven't, but.. We've located. That means here's the range.

EB So the B-52s have got to keep out of this.

RN Excuse me.

EB And what, what a Abrams would like to have is authority to bomb these SAM sites, the, within the 19<sup>th</sup> North mile of the border the...

RN mmm...

EB See that a. . .

HK Could he knock it off while we're in China? And not do it that week . . .

EB Yea, yea sure he could do it now.

EB He could do it now, and he could stop.

RN I don't think they should be doing it while we're in China.

EB No, no.

RN Only, when in China, should only be protective reaction, in a technical sense. But right now harassment is enough.

HK But couldn't we stage it, as long as, we and .. agree and on the grounds that they had fired rockets. . .

RN No body, in a, seems to me . . . He is to say... He is to call all of these things protective reaction. Just call it protective reaction.

EB Well he is . . .

RN Alright, because preventive reaction. I am simply saying that we expand the definition of protective reaction to mean preventive reaction where a SAM site is concerned. And I think that, that, to be sure that anything that goes down there is just to call it ordinary protective reaction. Who the hell's gonna say they didn't fire?

HK Now, could they stop from blabbing it at every bloody briefing?

EB Yes.

RN Why do we have to put? You tell them I don't want to beat around any more. Tell 'em. I want you to tell Abrams when you get back that he is to tell the military not to put out extensive briefings with regard to our military activities from now on until we get back from China.

RN Do it, but don't say anything.

EB Yea.

RN Goddamn it, he can do that.

RN .. ERO officer ..

EB Oh, yea, yea, sure.

EB And, uh, you see, a, Mr. President, there are about... the enemy has about 168 SAM sites. That's down in Southern Laos, three in

Southern Laos now. Now we've got about 28 of them mapped. But they can move these anywhere within 6 hours from one site to another. And that's what they do. And a, so, and a. The B-52 is very vulnerable. We

RN Well, listen. Too, I would never forgive myself for not knocking those sites out. Henry?

HK I have no problem with it.

RN Alright, your problem with it is that you don't want them over while we're in China, is that it?

HK I don't want them flying from the 17<sup>th</sup>, from the time you leave until ...

RN Yea, yea.

HK ... until the time you come back.

RN Between now and the 17<sup>th</sup>, you work out the authority. He can hit SAM sites period. Okay? But he is not to do it with a public declaration, alright. And if it does get out, if it does, he says it's a protective reaction strike. He is to describe it as protective reaction. And he doesn't have to spell it out, if they strike, that's all he needs is a SAM site, a protective reaction strike against a SAM site. As you know, when we're hittin'.. unless we call that protective reaction

EB Yea.

RN ... we can bomb the hell out of a lot of other stuff.

EB Sure.

RN Okay? So what we want are protective reaction, fair enough?

HK Fair enough.

RN So, you got about two weeks, about 10 days now to scare the hell out of them at least. From the 17<sup>th</sup> to about the first of March he dead.

EB Yea.

RN As far as North Vietnam is concerned. But then tell him to get those damn bombers and start getting something from South Vietnam.



Appendix C: Top Secret Message from Chairman of the Joint Chiefs

**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE**  
NATIONAL MILITARY COMMAND CENTER  
MESSAGE CENTER

*Boch*

5084

1202 01LT 005  
IN T

ACTION: CJCS(ADM MOORER)(06)1-6  
DIST: OPR DJS J3(GEN ZIAS)(01)7 CSA CSAF CMC CMC TERMSVC FILE(01)8  
(008)

TRANSIT/072153Z/072207Z/000112GRP0331  
DE RUEKJCS #1957 0382205  
ZNY: AAAAA  
C 072153Z FEB 72 ZFF6  
FM JCS  
TO RUHHQA/DINCPAC  
INFO RHMSNVA/CONUSMACV  
BT

**IMMEDIATE**  
~~SECRET EXCLUSIVE~~ ASD/PA X

~~T O P S E C R E T~~ SECRET EXCLUSIVE 5084

FOR ADMIRAL MCCAIN, INFO FOR GENERAL ABRAM: RQM ADMIRAL MOORER  
CJCS SENDS  
DELIVER DURING WAKING HOURS ONLY  
USBJ: OPERATING AUTHORITY, DMZ (S)

1. (U) TO HELP MINIMIZE THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE NORTH VIETNAMESE BUILD A MILITARY CAPABILITY WITHIN THE DMZ FOR SUDDEN STRIKES ACROSS THE PMDL. YOU ARE AUTHORIZED TO CONDUCT TACTICAL AIR STRIKES INTO THE NORTHERN PORTION OF THE DMZ WHENEVER CONUSMACV DETERMINES THE NORTH VIETNAMESE ARE USING THE AREA IN PREPARATION FOR AN ATTACK SOUTHWARD. THE AUTHORITY WILL EXPIRE ON 1 MAY 1972.

2. (U) PUBLIC AFFAIRS GUIDANCE. NO PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT OF ANY KIND WILL BE MADE WITH REGARD TO THESE ACTIONS, IF THERE ARE

PAGE 1

~~T O P S E C R E T~~

00010001

DECLASSIFIED BY JOINT STAFF  
DATE: MAR 01 2000

009719

Source: Aloysius Casey and Patrick Casey, *Velocity Speed with Direction: The Professional Career of General Jerome F. O'Malley*, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Air University Press, September 2007, 147.

Appendix D: White House Tape Transcript – 14 June 1972

**ORIGINAL COPY OF DOCUMENT ATTACHED ON FOLLOWING PAGES**

Source: Richard M. Nixon. White House Tapes Transcripts. Nixon White House Tapes and Archives, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. Nixon Oral History Collection.

**General John D. Lavelle, USAF  
1916 – 1979**

**Transcript of audio-taped conversations of  
June 14, 1972 (11:15 A.M.) of  
President Richard M. Nixon &  
Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman  
and  
President Richard M. Nixon &  
National Security Advisor to the President  
Dr. Henry A. Kissinger**

---

WHT Reference Cassette . C-2240 RC-2  
WHT 733 Part 3 of 6  
733-3 (sl) to 733-7  
CD 1 of 1  
CD-R-DA  
16 bit @ 44.1 kHz  
TRT: 45:30  
This CD created:  
3-16-04

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14 June 1972, Wednesday  
White House  
Oval Office

11:15 am  
733-4

Discussion between the President and H. R. Haldeman

2:41

RN Bob, when you've got a minute I want to talk to you about that Lavelle thing. I didn't know it was going to come up this morning.

733-6

Meeting between Henry Kissinger and the President.

RN Well, let me ask you about Lavelle. I was, I had it on my list this morning. I just don't want him to be made a goat, goddamnit.

HK Right, I'll tell you what.

RN We all know what protective reaction is, this damn Laird a playing games . . .

HK What happened with Lavelle was he had reason to believe that we wanted him to aggressive steps.

RN Right, that's right.

HK A, then he did it. And then suddenly Laird came down on him like a ton of bricks. And he had him already removed by the time I even learned about it. By that time the damage was done.

RN Why did he even remove him? You, you destroy a man's career?

HK Well. I'm gonna tell you Mr. President, Laird is getting to be almost unbearable for this government. I mean we've, we've got to carry him until the election. But you gotta talk to Shultz sometime or

RN I know.

HK There is no issue that is come down where he doesn't willfully and deliberately. I mean, Rogers is sort of like an old woman, he hits out every once in a while, but basically, Rogers has set a certain limit he will not openly defy you.

RN No.

HK He'll wail and cry, and he'll be nasty, and he'll occasionally get his people to leave. But when you give him an unambiguous order, that he is enough of a lawyer, that for his client, he will not defy his client. That goddamn Laird, take that five billion dollar figure he got out on the budget. He promised us he wouldn't do it, I talked to him, Shultz talked to him. We told him that he could say that the supplementary . . .

RN I remember that in round two or something like that.

HK But besides Mr. President, if we, it's a totally irresponsible figure. When ever has one ever submitted a supplementary before the budget had been voted?

RN That's right.

HK A, this is projecting the present . . .

RN We have got to get, we've got to get that knocked out of the box. I hope you can go tomorrow. . .

HK Well, this is the present rate of expenditure projected over a year.

RN I know. Assuming no action in Vietnam . . .

HK Assuming that there will be no negotiations. . .

RN Assuming sorties at the present rate . . .

HK For the whole year.

RN I know. I know. We know they're not going to be that angry.

HK But, he shouldn't force us into making that clear because must let the North Vietnamese believe. . .

RN North Vietnamese we must plan. The lack of it is shocking.

RN But, come back to Lavelle, I don't want a man persecuted for doing what he thought was right. I just don't want it done. And this goddamn sergeant who wrote the letter to the senator. That sounds like another Ellsberg case to me. You know I don't like that worth a damn. Now, what is this situation? Is this, this, this, this sounds, connects the feelings with making the guy a goat now. It's just not right!

HK And basically. Of course the military are impossible too. It's a. . .

RN Well, they all turn on each other like rats.

HK They turn on each other like rats. That's so selfish. When I ordered Moorer yesterday to stop bombing for three days, you would have thought that I had asked him to, to scrap the B-52s or something like that. Here we are, if it weren't for you they wouldn't be doing any goddamn bombing. A, if when, when the ceiling is a little bit below minimums you can't get them to fly for a week on end. So how the hell can three days make that much difference?

RN It doesn't change. It doesn't and they know it.

HK And a. . . . I mean I think we owe this to the Russians of not humiliating them.

RN We're not gonna do it.

HK I mean, we're not gonna do it. But it is an understanding.

RN Yea.

HK That it is bad enough that we are bombing the rest of the country. I

mean that's a humiliation enough for them. That, that they can't get the rest of the country. So.

RN Come back to Lavelle now. I just a . . . can't somebody. Can we do anything now to stop this damn thing, or? Why'd he even remove 'em?

HK No. If they hadn't removed, well. They kept John Vogt instead who is probably better, but. Because he understands us better. But, Lavelle was actually moved before Vogt went out there. Lavelle was removed at the end of March.

RN Because of this?

HK Yea.

RN Why the hell did this happen!? A decision of that magnitude without? I should have known about it Henry, because this is a

HK Well, Mr. President, the point was

RN Because this is something we told. You remember we, we, we told Laird keep pressure on there in March!

HK By the time I knew about it, it had already been done. There was no point in

RN I see.

HK . . . involving you anymore. Because he ratified me after the guy had already been removed. How we managed to get to this point with this goddamn cabinet is beyond my belief.

RN Well, come back to Lavelle. How is it going to a . . . ?

HK Let me talk to

RN In other words, how do we handle it public relations wise? Bill seemed to be very concerned about it. What do you think?

HK I think this will go away. I think we should just say a . . . after all we took corrective steps. We could have easily hidden it. I think you might as well make a virtue of a necessity.

RN I know, I don't want the... Well, I don't think anybody gives a damn that we went in and bombed. I think they probably favored it. I

don't want to a . . .

HK I think

RN I don't like to have the feeling though that the military can get out of control. Well, maybe this censures that. This says we do something when they... It's just a hell of a damn. And it's a bad rap for him Henry.

HK It's a bad rap for him under his com. The way this press plays things a is really.

RN Yea. Like what?

HK Well, now they're making a huge affair out of, out of this thing. Now, they say twenty three unauthorized bombing attacks. I'm going to get a record of them. I'm sure that each one of them was maybe two bombs on an airfield. They weren't mad raids. They were raids on by two or three airplanes. There weren't any big raids.

RN In March or not? Do you know the? We didn't start that 'til after, until April. Until the invasion.

HK No, no I mean the unauthorized strikes that Lavelle did. Were very few; were very small. And a all directed at air defenses. So they a . . .

RN Of course it's what the Air Force always wants to hit. Let me ask again, but a, when you say you think it will go away, how will the Press let it go away. Or are they just eager to get at us on Vietnam, isn't that it?

HK Well, they're eager to find something on Vietnam, Mr. President. What I think now, today, we've got that China announcement which I'm told went very well.

RN Did it?

HK Yeah.

HK I haven't heard the statement

RN Yeah, let me ask you this... back again

HK See I think everyone is, see everyone.



RN I mean this China announcement comes at a good time because I noticed Mansfield would warn them yesterday that China would not stand by with troops too close to its border. It's a little (writing on the wall), I guess.

RN But Mike, Mike is, do you know what I mean? He's ambivalent; he is political

HK Yeah, but now that get at all of next week people have to shut up because we.. they won't know.. Podgorny there.. uh

RN Do you think it will become known Podgorny's there

HK Oh yeah, that's out now

RN Oh, that he did get there?

HK It was on every television this morning that, uh, that Podgorny was on his way to Hanoi starting at Delhi and the delay no one knew about it.

RN Come again a. First of all. On Lavelle, there's nothing we can do, ha?

HK Twenty second.

RN There's a, there's a hearing.

HK There's a hearing. Yea. And a we shouldn't have permitted the guy to be a. Well we shouldn't have permitted; we should have been told that he was being removed, we could have prevented it.

RN Second point. What about Laird? What are we going to do about him?

HK I think we have to con him along. Let's hope a. You know yesterday for example I called Moorer about getting the raids getting called off. Moorer. . .

RN Told Mel Laird.

HK Of course immediately. I thought Moorer would keep it in military channels and not have any strife. On some pretext, of course Moorer immediately told Laird. When he gets an order he doesn't like, he plays Laird against us, and Laird blew his top. I said it's now gonna become public and we're doing what Johnson did.

RN Well damn him. Why didn't he support the money then?

HK We're letting the Russians dictate our policy. He said all they have to from now on is send an emissary to Hanoi. Total baloney.

RN I went into that (with pressure), remember, I said how long is he going to be there, three weeks? and I said. He said, no, three days.

HK It's total baloney, Mr. President, because, a, it's one thing for them to send an emissary on other business. It's another thing to send an emissary carrying our messages.

RN I suppose Rogers will not say anything about the fact that Podgorny is going there....

HK Well, no, now that he's there now. What we don't know is what he's doing there.

RN ...Carrying a message. Well, and ()...

HK People will see the pattern, Podgorny in Hanoi, Kissinger in Peking. Uh, I mean, we.. It looks like it could...

(SECTION REDACTED)

RN It's a (bit of mystery) that the (). that's probably the best summary of the kind of thing we want to say.

HK Yeah... beautiful

RN It's well said, isn't it. It got it all out

HK What's funny is that he didn't have the courage to () until that last paragraph () about the courage.

RN Yeah, that's what gets me about Laird. Goddamn him, he talks about we're gonna, we're playing with the Russian side. (Bill), you say, why are we sellin' for the Russians and all this? For christsakes. Where the hell were they when we had em mined. Where were both of them?

(Simultaneously)

HK Where were they when we had a mine (waiting for them) in Cambodia (or Laos)

RN When were they in Cambodia?!?

RN Where were they then?

RN This action should have to damage the relations for ()...

RN Let's go back the courage to assume risks.

RN Well you see, deep down, the thing that I'm gettin' at is this. That a, with Laird, I just don't like him to make a goat of this fella. Because Laird knows goddamn well, that a, I told him, I said it's protective reaction. He winks, he says, 'oh I understand.'

HK Yea, but Laird is pretty ambitious. See Laird is actively. The only thing Laird is now positioning himself for is

RN he can't

HK Is he's mad to be the viable candidate for '76. And a . . .

(SECTION REDACTED)

RN Uh, well, on Lavelle, I don't know how the hell we can get off this? We can, Who is, whose spinning it? Who, who ...

HK Let me, let me give you.

RN I don't want to get you involved. Whynch ya get Haig involved.

HK Yes. That's what I want to do.

RN Lead with Haig. 'Cause I'd like you to do something today; or Haig if you're gonna be gone. You leave tomorrow night?

HK I think I'll leave Friday morning Mr. President.

# Letters

letters@afa.org

May 2007

PDF

Print this page

## The Lavelle Affair□

Your article in the February 2007 issue [*"Lavelle, Nixon, and the White House Tapes," p. 82*] is not fair to former Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John D. Ryan or to our commander in Vietnam, Gen. Creighton Abrams. It was certainly true that in my meetings with Gen. John Lavelle I told him that my order on "protective reaction" should be viewed liberally. I invented the term "protective reaction." Prior to my order, there was no authorization (under McNamara or Clifford) to destroy dangerous targets except when fired upon without special permission. Gen. Bus Wheeler, Adm. Tom Moorer, and General Abrams all agreed with the liberal interpretation on my order on protective reaction. The new orders permitted hitting anti-aircraft installations and other dangerous targets if spotted on their missions, whether they were activated or not.

General Ryan, as Chief of Staff of the US Air Force, expressed great displeasure with Lavelle and was, indeed, upset when he came to my office after he found out that Lavelle perhaps encouraged pilots, if not directed them, to lie about the coordinates on some of their missions. I can assure you that no one instructed Lavelle to falsify any reports. One cannot permit the falsification of records in any military command. I have no regrets in supporting General Ryan, even though I admired Lavelle as a fine gentleman with an otherwise great Air Force record. I can assure you that President Nixon never asked me to approve of any falsification of records by any officer in the US military.

Melvin R. Laird□, Washington, D.C.

*Mr. Laird's statement that "new orders permitted hitting anti-aircraft installations and other dangerous targets if spotted on their missions, whether they were activated or not" confirms the fairness and accuracy of our article. Although 35 years late, Mr. Laird's admission fully vindicates the truthfulness of General John D. Lavelle before the United States Congress.*

*Moreover, there is no evidence to support Mr. Laird's suggestion that Lavelle encouraged or directed pilots to lie about coordinates on missions or falsify reports. At this point, the only remaining issue of veracity relates to the under-oath statements by senior officials of the Department of Defense to the United States Senate.—aloysius and patrick casey*

Source: Melvin Laird, Letters to the Editor: Laird Response, Air Force-Magazine.com,  
<http://www.airforce-magazine.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/2007/May%202007/0507letters.aspx>.

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